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ABSTRACT

This paper contrasts two traditions, one originally seeking applications for theory, the other looking for solutions to problems in foreign language teaching, and finds both valuable. Five applied linguistics topics--curriculum, discourse analysis, systemic linguistics, testing, and second language acquisition--are briefly discussed within this framework. It is concluded that the value of empirical research depends on the quality of conceptual analysis. Contains 13 references. (JL)

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SPECULATION AND EMPIRICISM IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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SPECULATION AND EMPIRICISM IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS[1]

Alan Davies (DAL)

Abstract

Speculation ought not to be a pejorative term, and ought not to be in conflict with empiricism. Davies contrasts two traditions, one originally seeking applications for theory, the other looking for solutions to problems in FLT, and finds both valuable. Five applied linguistics topics - curriculum, discourse analysis, systemic linguistics, testing, second language acquisition - are briefly discussed within this framework. Davies concludes, in broad agreement with Widdowson, that the value of empirical research depends upon the quality of conceptual analysis, and advocates scepticism and humility.

> 'Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold,
> Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
> Which thou dost glare with'
> (Macbeth to Banquo's Ghost, Macbeth 3.4:93)

0. It is a common criticism of applied linguistics - a criticism made by its practitioners as much as anyone - that there is no objectivity about it, that its views and hypotheses and conclusions are determined by fashion rather than by rigorous scientific procedure, that in fact there are no hard data because there is no way of establishing whether something is a result or a finding. This is a two-fold criticism. It is a theoretical criticism, denying that applied linguistics has any organised body of theory, and it is an experimental criticism, arguing that even if there is any body of theory there is no link between that and arguments as to how to proceed, i.e. how to teach and learn languages. As a result, in language teaching as in education generally, what determines change is the roundabout of fashion which seems recently to be moving back towards a modified grammar-translation method after a number of years in which such an approach to language teaching was anathema to many people. It may be that we shall always have to take account of changing fashion simply because we have no way of finally establishing 'the best way' to learn or teach a language. Since there is no easy way of evaluating the internal logic of a theoretical model of language, the question of what constitutes the best language-learning theory may not be a matter for experimental research at all, but a matter for philosophical argument about what kinds of aims we are interested in at any one time. Doubtless these will be influenced by...within-theory experimentation...our only hope of escaping from the tyranny of fashion is through submitting our guess-work to the rigour of hypothesis and experimentation (Davies 1977:1)

[1] A version of this paper was read at the 16th annual meeting of the Applied Linguistic Association of Australia in Townsville, September/October 1991

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I wrote that comment in the mid-70s. It was published as the opening to the Introduction to Volume 4 of the Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics (Allen and Davies 1977). I quote my own words, partly of course out of astonishment that that was actually me all those years ago, but more importantly because I want to suggest that our unease about the role of fashion, about the apparent tensions between speculating and empirical requirements and imperatives, that these are just not new, that they have always been around.

They are more important in my view than that weasel-like dismissal of applied linguistics, that it lacks coherence. Yes indeed, I admit it, it does lack coherence. But I just do not see that as negative; indeed it does not make applied linguistics any different from any other academic discipline that I know of, linguistics, English, education, even medicine and law. They are all loose federations, often warring ones more on the model of Yugoslavia than of Australia or the European Community, but in no case is there a single monolithic, unitary view, nowhere is there complete agreement of what the discipline is about. No, academic disciplines, certainly academic departments, are political groupings, which of course means that over time it is proper for them to regroup. Of course there are some interests that are closer and some that are further apart. In that context applied linguistics is actually in a strong position, if only because it is centrally about language, about intervention in language problems (such as in teaching) and about language treatment (such as language planning). In terms of social and human focus applied linguistics is in as strong and as coherent a position as is, say, medicine. As the title of this paper indicates, speculation and empiricism do concern me, not that they are in some sort of conflict or tension, no, because again that appears to be normal for academic disciplines, but because we are unhappy about their coevality. We should not be. They are both there, they are both necessary and we should welcome their presence as our discipline matures.

I think that was what I was trying to say back in 1977, that speculation and empiricism both had their place, and as such were capable of generating both philosophical argument and the rigour of hypothesis and experimentation.

1. Speculation seems to have fallen into bad company. From the sense of 'contemplation, consideration or profound study of some subject' and 'conclusion reached by abstract or hypothetical reasoning' it has come to be used in somewhat disparaging ways, often preceded by 'mere', 'bare' or 'pure', implying conjecture or surmise. This of course quite apart from its more operatic senses of 'action or practice of buying and selling goods, lands, stocks and shares etc. in order to profit by the rise or fall in the market value as distinct from regular trading or investment; engagement in any business enterprise or transaction of a venturesome or risky nature, but offering the chance of great or unusual gain'. Alas! try as they may no applied linguistic speculator has, as far as I am aware, yet reached great or unusual gain though there are rumours that Stephen Krashen has put in a joint bid for The Age with Packer!

There is also the sense in speculation (though it is not made explicitly) of some deductive process. That of course matches the inductive label attached to empiricism, which is defined as 'the use of empirical methods in any art or science', empirical itself receiving rather shorter shrift as having a concern for observation and experience more than for theory ('derived from or guided by experience or

experiment; depending upon experience or observation alone, without using science or theory'-Macquarie Dictionary).

It turns out that speculation and empiricism should not in fact be in conflict. What contradicts empiricism is rationalism. While 'empiricism' attracts the comment:

> reason cannot of its own provide us with knowledge of reality without reference to sense experience and the use of our sense organs, (Angeles 1981).

'rationalism' has this one:

> reality is knowable...independently of observation, experience and the use of empirical methods; reason is the principal organ of knowledge and science is basically a rationally conceived deductive system only indirectly concerned with sense experience. (ibid.)

It would be convenient to agree that speculation combines the two senses of (random) conjecture and of reasoning attaching to some explanatory theory, while empiricism means the use of experimental methods to validate a theory. However, what seems to have happened is that empirical has appropriated to itself the package of the scientific methods, theory plus controlled enquiry, while speculation has increasingly been marginalised to the armchair, the haphazard and the guess.

What, after all, of this definition:

> speculative philosophy: in the pejorative sense: philosophy which constructs idle thoughts about idle subjects? (ibid.).

Happily, speculation is not only this snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. In the same definition of speculative philosophy, we read:

> in the non-pejorative sense: philosophy which constructs a synthesis of knowledge from many fields (the sciences, the arts, religion, ethics, social sciences) and theorizes (reflects) about such things as its significance to humankind, and about what it indicates about reality as a whole. (ibid.)

It is of course the case that, for many, speculation in this latter sense remains a noble activity; and I shall argue that in applied linguistics we need both speculation and empiricism; indeed, one of the characteristics of applied linguistics is that even hunches or guesses always come from somewhere. Just like other academic areas. And when mere speculation in applied linguistics is once again being held up to scorn because it is not experimental it will be well to remember that Macbeth's criterion for Banquo's being a ghost, for his not being alive, was precisely that he lacked speculation:

> hast no speculation in those eyes
> Which thou dost glare with'

Ernest Gellner quotes Keynes:

> "The ideas of economists and political philosophers...are more powerful that is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back". This is true far beyond the sphere of economic thought. Those who spurn philosophical history are slaves of defunct thinkers and unexamined theories. (Gellner 1991:11,12).

2. If the ontogenesis of an academic or scientific discipline has any phylogenetic status, then we might posit that as it matures it becomes increasingly empirical but does not cease to be speculative. Just as human societies show a movement from hunting-gathering (where change is wholly evolutionary) through the agrarian (where change is by choice), so maturing disciplines move towards a deliberate marriage between the speculative and the experimental so as to make what is investigable what is also worth investigating. It seems to be a characteristic of a poor experimenter as of non-serious discipline that their research questions are unresearchable. 'Industria' (Gellner's name for the stage of industrial society)

> is not based on any one discovery, but rather on the generic or second-hand discovery that successful systematic investigation of Nature, and the application of the findings for the purpose of increased output, are feasible, and, once initiated, not too difficult. (ibid: 17-18)

We might perhaps make that a criterion of a mature discipline and by that token ask ourselves whether applied linguistics contains that successful systematic investigation of Nature, increased output (interpreted as we will), and whether the systematic investigation is not itself too difficult.

3. It will be helpful to consider two opposing applied linguistic traditions, both of which are still very much influencing what we teach, what we research and how we see ourselves as applied linguists. One model starts with theory (typically linguistic theory), the other with practice. The first (Linguistics-Applied) has had much influence in North America and in Continental Europe (and I think also in Australia); the second (Applied-Linguistics) is more commonly found in Britain and some parts of the Commonwealth. The American Linguistics-Applied tradition starts with linguistic theory and looks for ways to apply it most usefully on practical problems such as language teaching; the British Applied-Linguistics tradition starts with the practical problems and then seeks theoretical (and/or practical) ways to understand and resolve those problems. The North American tradition of Linguistics-Applied grew out of the search by linguists (e.g. Bloomfield, Fried) for applications for their theoretical and descriptive interests. These applications they found in language teaching, especially during the Second World War. The foundation of the English Language Institute at Ann Arbor, Michigan, was one of the key initiatives in American applied linguistics, representing a substantial intellectual investment in language teaching by linguists, either faculty members or graduate students, whose chief interest was in the main in linguistics not in language teaching. American applied linguistics can therefore be characterised as Linguistics-Applied, an essentially

top-down approach. This tradition also holds in Britain in the work for example of J.R. Firth (also very much involved during World War Two in intensive language teaching courses), and of his student, Michael Halliday; hence of course my comment above about the situation in Australia, at least in the beginnings of applied linguistics here.

It is now however the mainstream British and Commonwealth tradition, which comes from quite a different source, that of teaching English as a foreign/second language in the former colonies, in Latin America, Japan and Continental Europe, above all outside the UK (and here may be another link between the Australian and the North American experience). The work that the British Council took on under Arthur King and developed widely around the world was in this tradition of professionalising language teaching. It was very much a bottom-up approach to the field and it led inevitably to a search for input of a theoretical kind. Hence the establishment in 1957 of the School of Applied Linguistics in the University of Edinburgh precisely to provide that theoretical backing and support.

For over 20 years from 1964 Pit Corder directed that effort. It is significant for our argument that in his own writing and scholarship Corder eventually found that tradition incoherent in its attempt to marry bits of theory to practical issues. What Corder's case indicates is that reliance on one or other of the two traditions alone (Applied-Linguistics and Linguistics-Applied) is inadequate: in his case a career which was so much in the mainstream of British applied linguistics and so successful in directing it needed to break with that tradition in order to make his major contribution, in the concept of interlanguage.

Corder's model of second language acquisition, interlanguage, based on speculation, has a stronger claim than most to be called a theory. For seriously empirical colleagues in North America and Europe, it never mattered that Corder's work was not empirical. For them he was the theory maker, and if there does now exist a theory of interlanguage and of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) then it is because of Corder's thinking and writing about these issues. He never disdained the label 'speculation', acknowledging that speculation necessarily antedates the empirical work that leads to the development of theory.

4. Brumfit (1985) suggests three types of applied linguistics research: policy oriented, truth seeking and action. Examples of the first might be curriculum study, of the second SLA and of the third test construction. I am however not easy about Brumfit's three-way split and would prefer a binary division: truth seeking and action/policy oriented. I shall call truth-seeking explanation and policy oriented/action practice. I hope this scheme will help make sense of both the teaching and the research aspects of applied linguistics courses. In addition to explanation and practice outcomes there is a third type of research dynamic, evaluation. For the present, however, it seems to me more helpful to regard evaluation as one aspect of the practice type of research.

5. Can the same be said of teaching applied linguistics? I want to propose that teaching and research in applied linguistics have similar purposes. Both are concerned with explanation, one with its expansion, the other with its dissemination; both are concerned with evaluation, one through particular types of research (we suggested policy oriented), the other through assessment of teaching and learning; both are also

concerned with practical outcomes, where research may be seeking new insights and solutions and teaching is training teachers etc. to implement those insights.

I propose therefore this matrix:

	Research	Teaching
Explanation	/	/
Practice: Problems	/	
Practice: Skills		/

Evaluation, we should remember, is incorporated in both Problems and Skills. That separation into Problems and Skills is in any case opportunistic as a way of stating something of the obvious about the difference between teaching and research.

Now to my five topics in applied linguistics, in each case offering a priority order as between Explanation and Problems/Skills, my hypothesis being that what determines that priority is not primarily the research-teaching distinction but something else, perhaps the contemporary urgency of the topic. We may ask ourselves of course whether, in terms of our earlier discussion about the maturing of disciplines, we would expect the basic division to be between teaching and research such that research is - by definition - primarily explanation oriented and teaching basically practice/skills oriented. We will return to this question.

The five topics I survey are all researched and taught within applied linguistics programmes. Three (curriculum, discourse analysis and systemic linguistics) I will approach from the point of view of their involvement as components of applied linguistics course work while the other two (language testing and second language acquisition) I will discuss from the point of view of their research capabilities. By this selection I make no statement about the priority or otherwise of these five topics within applied linguistics, nor do I imply any value judgements among the five selected about which ones are more important in research or in teaching. My choice to discuss some in their research context and some in their teaching context is arbitrary, happenstance.

6. Teaching

6.1 Curriculum

White (1988) offers three models for change in an existing curriculum:

1. research/development and diffusion/dissemination
2. problem-solving
3. social interaction.

He then examines three types of innovation strategy: power-coercive, empirical-rational and normative-re-educative. His conclusion is as follows:

> On the whole...innovations which are identified by the users themselves (rather than specified by an outside change agent) will be more effectively and durably installed than those which are imported from outside, since it is the teachers and students themselves who will have 'ownership' of and commitment to the innovation concerned if it has a grass roots or bottom-up rather than a top-down origin. For this reason, a problem-solving model and a normative-re-educative approach to innovation will probably be the most successful combination in language teaching as elsewhere (White 1988:133).

This problem-solving philosophy is sometimes associated with Stenhouse (1975) and his ideas of action research. As such the lines between skills and explanations are elided. While I agree with White about the effectiveness of grass roots change I am not as sanguine as he appears to be about the necessary attitude change taking place from within. 'Normative change will involve alteration in attitudes, values, skills and significant relationships' (White 1988:129). True, he does also point out that 'direct interventions by change agents' are necessary. But what is really being asked for here is a sophisticated language teaching culture (to go right back to the beginning of this paper, a choice or industrial culture) which is difficult to create *ab initio*. It is as though curriculum is the last topic to expect change in rather than, as is so often the case, the first to be enlisted.

Widdowson (1990) is helpfully outspoken on the role of empirical research in determining language teaching outcomes (one of the problems with Widdowson's position is that he switches backwards and forwards in his discussion between language teaching and applied linguistics). For Widdowson empirical research has nothing to offer language teaching in terms of solutions. His view is that what is needed is appropriate conceptualisation. There is, he suggests, in discussing Krashen, a need for clear thinking.

Widdowson overreaches himself, first, because of the Gellner argument about latent scholarly influences and, second, because his denial of the possibility of pedagogical problems being solved simply because there is vaguely relevant empirical research is effectually an Aunt Sally, an *ignaratio elencti*. When Widdowson is concerned with syllabus (curriculum, as White points out they are used interchangeably) his conclusion is that it is 'unlikely that any research at present or in the future will provide us with anything very definite to resolve these difficulties' (1990: 154). What matter for Widdowson are first that the principles on which the syllabus has been designed are explicit and second that the teachers should be methodologically aware. But this is surely sleight of hand. No matter what we call it, curriculum or syllabus, or syllabus and/or methodology, there is always a delivery issue for language teaching, and the problem surely is how to provide for that delivery. My own view is that curriculum/syllabus/methodology is always problem-oriented and that there is also a necessary secondary research (explanatory) aspect.

6.2 Discourse analysis

Much, perhaps most analysis of linguistic systems including discourse makes use of data. No doubt, as with novels, however invented the examples of spoken and written texts and interactions might be, they still to some extent relate to reality, but of course it is a question of how close. True, the idealised conversations we find in invented texts such as novels are based upon the writer's knowledge of the language but, as we

also know, that knowledge is diverse. In other words, what the writer invents or imagines may tell us only about the writer's invention and imagination, not about what s/he actually says and how s/he actually behaves in daily life. It is of course an extreme form of the observer's paradox.

For some linguists this is no problem. Gazdar maintains 'I shall assume...that invented strings and certain intuitive judgements about them constitute legitimate data for linguistic research'. (Gazdar 1979:11 quoted in Brown and Yule 1983:20).

Brown and Yule themselves take a different view, and in my opinion the correct one. Their material, they claim 'is typically based on the linguistic output of someone other than the analyst' (1983:20). They summarise their approach as follows:

> the discourse analyst treats his data as the record (text) of a dynamic process in which language was used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker/writer to express meanings and achieve intentions (discourse). Working from this data, the analyst seeks to describe regularities in the linguistic realisations used by people to communicate those meanings and intentions. (1983:26)

Guy Cook, describing the Birmingham discourse analysis 'school' in his recent book on Discourse (Cook 1989), tells us:

> Sinclair and Coulthard recorded a number of British primary school lessons. On the basis of these data they proposed a rank structure for these lessons as follows...They then drew upon rules based on the data. (Cook 1989:46-7).

Whatever we may think of the Birmingham school and even though we know that the primary school lessons they recorded contained at most only 8 children in each lesson to make the recording easier, we have to accept that foremost in discourse analysis research is explanation, and that in teaching discourse we are in our applied linguistics classes more concerned with disseminating what is known about discourse than about how to do it. Of course, as with teaching about grammar (or indeed statistics) it is surely the case that for some learners operating new skills and expanding their knowledge go hand in hand, that a totally conceptual approach is ineffective, that it needs to be accompanied by a skills (how to do discourse analysis) workshop. At the same time, what is primary is surely the dissemination of the knowledge, and even if we are teaching it hands-on that is because we are primarily concerned with the knowledge not the skills.

6.3 Systemic linguistics

As we have already noted, systemic linguistics (or systemic functional linguistics, or to use an earlier term scale and category grammar, or in one of its Australian applications genre theory) has been very influential in Australian applied linguistics and in particular in Australian educational linguistics. For those of us who are not systemicists there is a real problem of relativity in trying to come to terms with the totality of approach that seems to be required for systemicists. Let me give a personal example. Some years ago after a reorganisation of departments in the university I was working in I asked one of my recently acquired colleagues what she was interested in teaching. Her reply was both generous and at the same time obscurantist. 'I'll teach

anything you like, Alan, but you must remember I'm a systemicist!' Game set and match to her! Like a religion, I thought to myself, impossible to argue against.

Be that as it may, its influence has as I have suggested been profound in Australia. And the influence, even though it is so largely in schools, is not so much in the teaching of skills. Like discourse analysis its mission is really about knowledge. As Martin quite charmingly remarks:

> You could accuse me, like everyone else, of being after power. I want people to see that the way a linguist looks at language makes explicit what we implicitly know and explains why we do often act as we do. (Martin 1985:62)

Well that's a fair cop! That really does seem to put systemics into the explanation bag rather than the skills bag, doesn't it?

I have mentioned relativity and its echoes of Whorf. I suppose that Whorfianism inevitably assumes a God's truth perspective. (And how interesting it is that both systemics and generative linguistics share that pursuit which for the rest of us is sadly the hunting of yet another snark.)

> It will be argued that genre, or to use the more technical linguistic term, register, exists. (Martin 1980:1)

Note that this register-genre distinction, which I have always found quite recondite, is here apparently non-existent. But the existence of genre (or register) is a given.

> There can be no doubt that genres exist; but exactly what they are is the subject of another generation's or two's research. (Martin and Rothery 1981:50).

Is it disingenuous of me to find something odd about that sentence? Genres exist but we don't know what they are! Something rather alien perhaps. Surely if you are so certain they exist then it must be possible to determine similarities of shape, behaviour and so on.

It seems that progress in Sydney (and Geelong?) was faster than anticipated and well before 'another generation or two' the truth had begun to emerge, so that Rothery could write:

> Teachers have always been aware of different varieties of writing. Narrative, Report and Exposition are commonly asked for in school. But what they have not been aware of is that the organisation or stages of these texts can be identified in distinctive ways and this is what constitutes a text's genre. (Rothery 1986:117).

We may find the actual analysis of genre (narrative has three stages: orientation, complication and resolution) somewhat flimsy, but for our purposes here that is beside the point. Clearly the systemic agenda is to impart knowledge about genre and as an adjunct to help teachers develop the skill of genre construction in their pupils.

The basic argument of genre apologists seems to me irrefutable, it is that 'genres are learned' (Rothery 1986:123). There seem to me to be two problems which constantly get in the way of this very sensible message. The first is that there appears to be a vendetta against one Donald Graves, who is stalking the land preaching his heresy of process writing, and who is reported as very bad news indeed; the other is that the pursuit and now the actualising of genres seems to me not only wrong but unnecessary. As with variety, as with register, so with genre; sure language has variety, it has register, it has genre, but that is not to say (indeed it is snark-like to pretend it can be demonstrated) that there are varieties, registers, genres which are describable, separate and discrete. It is of course the old language problem (rather languages problem) under another name.

By 1987 the work had gone on apace and there is now greater clarity about the distinction between genre and register (a distinction which you will remember was non-existent in 1980.):

> genre theory differs from register theory in the amount of emphasis it places on social purpose as a determining variable in language use' (Martin, Christie and Rothery 1987:119-20).

Taking three examples of topics within applied linguistics teaching programmes, I have argued that in each of the three cases Explanation and Practice play a part; further that in individual cases the emphasis is likely to be on one more than on the other. In Curriculum it is more on Practice, while in discourse analysis and systemics it is more on Explanation. I turn now briefly to two topics from research directions in applied linguistics, Testing and Second Language Acquisition (SLA). They make an interesting comparison pair in that they appear to have started from quite different origins and have moved in the last 15 years in opposite directions to one another. As we shall see that is very much a simplification.

7. Research

7.1 Language testing

Language testing is the prime example in research of being (or of having been) at the developmental end. It exists as it were to create new tests, trialled, validated and so on, but nevertheless not originating new ideas about language definitions or learning. That has now partly changed since language testing has in the last years come to be at the cutting edge of our investigations into proficiency (the unitary nature of language), the meaning of the native speaker, the definition of communicative competence, as well as questions about variety (the status of languages for specific purposes) (Davies 1990). What is more, language testing has developed new methodologies or at least made use of alternative ones for its own investigations, always a sign of a maturing discipline. And yet I would want to say that language testing in its research mode is still primarily a practice (problems) research discipline.

7.2 Second language acquisition

If we can for the moment forget about the error analysis origin of SLA, an origin like some forms of poverty and obscurity in birth which is also conveniently forgotten, then SLA (as we saw in our discussion about Corder's interlanguage), like that other

three letter word sex, began in the 1960s, as a deliberate attempt to raise the theoretical stakes in applied linguistics on the analogy of child language acquisition. As we also saw, Corder's initiative was quickly taken up empirically and I would say has been in the last 15 years over-studied empirically. As Widdowson would no doubt say, we have left ourselves too little conceptual analysis, too little explanation, too many trees, too little of the wood. That seems to me now at last to be changing. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), hard-nosed empiricists both, comment in their recent survey on how many studies there have been ('a four-fold growth' 1991: 5) but state that there is indeed now a need for more 'research studies which concentrate on improving our understanding of the effect of choosing from among particular instructional design features' (1991:332). That seems to mean that they think SLA research should take more interest in facilitating and expediting the SLA process (1991:6). Nevertheless for my money (as well as Larsen-Freeman and Long's) at the moment it is clear that for most people who regard themselves as SLA researchers (as opposed to researchers into second language learning) it is explanation that has top priority.

8. Matrix

So we can now fill in the matrix we offered in 5.

	Research			Teaching	
	LT	SLA	DA	System.	Curric.
Explanation	L	H	H	H	L
Practice: Problems	H	L			
Practice: Skills			L	L	H

To return to Speculation and Empiricism: just as teaching and research in applied linguistics both contain aspects of explanation and of practice, so too do they both admit of speculation and empiricism which, after all, turn out at best to be ways of, methods of doing scholarship. Over time (as we saw with language testing and SLA) a change in priority may occur, and it may be that there is a natural life cycle of a topic as there is of a discipline. Or it may also be that we need to be more interventionist, more deliberate, such that when a discipline seems to be moving away from an applied interest and becoming self regarding, setting up its own research agendas (SLA until recently, language testing now?), becoming separate from applied linguistics, perhaps than we need to take action. I am however reluctant to suggest what action, since in such cases it may be that what is happening is in itself healthy (and may change again with time, as perhaps in the Error Analysis to SLA and now to second language learning?) If there is still need for the discarded topic, then it may be best to start up a new topic. That after all is why applied linguistics got going in the first place, because linguistics seemed to become less and less interested in language learning and language teaching.

In conclusion I find myself close to the Widdowson view, the primacy of clear thinking and of theory.

> The value of empirical research ultimately depends on the quality of conceptual analysis that defines the objects of enquiry. (Widdowson 1990:25).

Unlike him I am not a complete nominalist since I believe there is such a thing as data, not too much of it and always purposive and within a theoretical framework. But we can afford to relax: applied linguistics, like any other derivative of philosophy, needs both explanations and skills to make its activity worthwhile. Sometimes one will be more important in one area than another. No matter. The five topics I have mentioned seem to me to be engaged in lively debates about the proper balance between the two. Scepticism and humility, those are the two chief scholarly virtues we all need more of.

> An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people - it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery. (Keats, letter to JH Reynolds 3/5/1818)

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